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ABSTRACT

This critical review of the literature on transracial adoption and placement begins with a brief discussion of policy decisions and court rulings, and then provides information on characteristics of adoptees and transracial adopters, a discussion of racial prejudice, and an interpretation of the findings. It is concluded that given the small amount of experimental data on the psychological effects of transracial adoption, the decision facing child placement agencies is subjective at best and political at worst. The relevant issue is not whether identity is abrogated by cross-racial placement, but whether identity is reason to dismiss the findings which address differences in achievement. There are thousands of black children awaiting placement whose immediate concern is finding a place to live. (RH)

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# Transracial Adoption and Placement:

## A Critical Review of Literature

John E. Hudson

Transracial adoption involves the placing of a child of one race in the home of adults who are of a different race than the child. Most often these placements have components of a white family receiving a black child. This has resulted in a division between the pro and con "transracial" camps. This study centers on this type of placement.

This type of placement is difficult to analyze, and empirical concerns are obscured by a large body of isolated clusters, anectdotal reporting, and extremely small sample sizes. Some extensive studies, widely quoted(such as Anderson, 1971, and Small, 1984), are nonetheless non-parametric.

Researchers often encounter "official" positions espoused by social agencies, agencies who respond to the lobbying of special interest groups such as the Association of Black Social Workers. Both sides of this debate are well represented and each has considerable support in the field and in academic circles.

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In 1968, The Child Welfare League of America established standards which maintainted that racial background should not determine the selection of a home for a child.In 1970, 35% of the adoptees in the State of Oregon were transracial, although the preponderance was Indian and Asian(Madison, 1973). In 1968, the California Supreme Court refused to allow racial consideration in adoptions(Simon,1977). In 1972 the National Association of Black Social Workers opposed transracial adoption for the following reasons: (1) the "necessity of self-determination from birth to death of all black people; (2) the "need of our

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young ones to begin at birth to identify with all black people in a black community"; (3) the philosophy that we need our own community to build a strong nation."(Howard, 1972). The Association took the stance that black children should be placed in black homes exclusively.

The Child Welfare League of America changed its policy in 1973(Grow,1975) and assumed the position that white children should be in white homes and black children should be in black homes as a "preferred policy". Their policy, still in effect, is that transracial placement should be a last resort if these conditions could not be met.

In 1986, U.S. District Judge Demascio ruled that placement agencies were not justified in using racial identity as the sole criterion in ruling out a placement. The Michigan Department of Social Services offers training in a "conceptual framework", as well as an "assessment guide" which relates issues such as the preservation of black heritage. This represents an attempt to systematize the placement decisions facing the first line worker. These guides and tools are basically broad lines of questioning intended to narrow the focus of the worker in the field. The worker, however, is placed in the position of having to assess ability to "preserve ethnic heritage", when such assessments are not possible for the basic researchers in human behavior.

## Review of Literature

### Characteristics of Adoptees

Some studies of transracial placements followed parametric designs. Moore(1986) tested via WISC two groups of adopted black children; one group adopted by middle class whites and the other group adopted by middle class blacks. A significant difference in response style exhibited, with the

transracial children averaging one z score above the inracial group on a test of verbal ability. The author concluded that these results supported a difference model rather than a deficit model(such as the assertions of bioresearchers Jensen and Shockley).

If it is assumed that the children in each group were equivalent in their innate ability before placement, and we also assume that I.Q. tests such as the WISC are "loaded" for culturally specific verbal style, this difference in scores can be accounted for by the difference in verbal style of white and black families. Again, asserting difference vs. deficit, and accepting that white verbal style is closer to the "official" linguistic style of the United States(which has no official language), the results can be explained as a realization of different verbal styles being reproduced by the children in accordance with that of the adult role models.

Scarr(1976) conducted a study in Minnesota of 130 black children who had been adopted by white parents. These children scored significantly higher on I.Q. measures(Stanford-Binet, WISC,WAIS)and school achievement than did black children who were adopted at the same time by black parents. Trotman(1977) compared 50 black and 50 white middle class adoptive New Jersey children, discerning a significant difference in family emphasis on verbal skills. This emphasis was designated the "intellectual home environment".

Scarr(1983) discerned age-specific variation in certain characteristics of transracial adoptees. Older black children who were in white homes did not score significantly higher on the Binet than those black children who were older and in black homes. However, younger black children scored higher on the WISC if they were in white homes than if they were in black homes.

Deutsch(1964) compared 543 Public school children from first and fifth grade classrooms. Using the Lorge-Thorndike scale, a one-way ANOVA found significant differences for race, socioeconomic status, and pre-school experience, but no differences for grade. In a statement describing the racially specific verbal selection on standardized tests, the author stated "Racial differences in I.Q. could reflect the ascending isomorphism between social class and the item content of intelligence tests."

Berbaum(1985) estimated that confluence of verbal and social factors accounted for up to 70% of the variance in aggregate models, but conceded that there existed no specific determinant for individuals. The results of one-way analyses support a trend, but no individual factors have been isolated. Group disparity is well documented but closing the gap involves a change in the language style of a subculture which may not be uniformly receptive to change.

Considering the literature which finds academic differences between transracial and inracial adoptees, less easily quantified differences must be addressed. Murray(1984) determined that transracially adopted children were not significantly different on permanency, adoption outcomes, roles of foster parents, or recidivism from inracially adopted children. If the demonstrated gap lies in verbal differences, a closer examination of the adopting parents is in order.

## Characteristics of Transracial Adopters

Priddy(1971) found that, from 1964 to 1968, approximately 58% of transracially adoptive parents had no children of their own at the time of adoption, while black adoptive parents averaged 1-2 children of their own. Falk(1970) compared white adoptive parents of black children in 10 midwestern

states with black adoptive parents from those states, finding that the transracially adoptive parents were higher on educational and occupational categories.

Ehrlich(1973) found a negative correlation between racial prejudice and intelligence, with overt racists exhibiting lower verbal skills. Similarly, Tuch(1984) found educational achievement inversely related to racist attitudes.

Grow(1975) studied 125 transracial parents via a nonstandardized questionnaire. The author reported that the majority of these transracial adopters exhibited a high degree of political and social consciousness which was not present in congruent inracial black adoptive homes. This study is limited in application due to "loading" of the questionnaire. One question was "yes or no? It is very important for a black child to develop pride in his or her own heritage." Not surprisingly, 93% of the respondents answered affirmative.

The concept of preservation of heritage does not lend well to quantification. Some studies attempted to determine whether black racial awareness could be preserved in a white home. Mcroy, et.al.(1984) interviewed 30 black or mixed children, 10-21, from Texas who had white adoptive fathers. Three strategies for coping with external factors were discerned : (1) 18 of these families had little contact with any other black children and perceived themselves as different from other black children; (2) six families acknowledged racial differences and lived in integrated neighborhoods; (3) six of the parents had adopted other black children and strongly emphasized black heritage.

Simon(1977) found, by use of dolls and pictures, that black children who were raised in white homes expressed no preference for black dolls over white dolls but still perceived themselves as black as accurately as whites perceived

themselves as white. The inclusion of a white control is effective here, althhough this study was non-parametric.

Porter(1971) cited a range of studies to support a position that many transracially adopted children have tendencies to classify themselves as white. Defining racial awareness as knowledge of racial categories and perceptual cues by which one clasifies others' race, the review concluded that transracial adoptees were not becoming sufficiently aware of their own racial heritage.

## Racial Prejudice

Moore(1983) utilized an ad hoc measure to decide that white students appeared more prejudiced than blacks in situations requiring prolonged interracial contact. This study used a nonstandardized "Scale to measure Racial Prejudice", composed by the author and loaded for content, potentially confounding discrete analysis.

Frey(1979) conducted a situational study of 130 white female University students. The author found these students expressed more discriminatory feelings toward blacks whose needs appeared to arise from not working hard enough for themselves. These students were less prejudiced toward blacks who were considered earnest in their efforts for self-improvement. This can be interpreted as a conditional form of racism, or as ethnocentrism. Whatever the situation, there is indication that conditions for white tolerance vary, which can further confound the first line worker's assessment of prospective transracial adopters.

Farley(1979) conducted an eight year longitudinal study of racial attitudes in Detroit. By questionnaire response blacks reported that they were aware of significantly less alienation in 1976 than in 1971.Just 11% expressed a

preference for living in all black neighborhoods.

Kruglanski(1983) found less flexibility in racial attitude than the Frey or Farley studies. in a 2x2x3 factorial, individuals' concept of other groups was found to be decided early and was impervious to subsequent evidence. This was labelled "epistemic freezing of Lay-inference", measured on sociometric preference scales.

## Interpretations

Whether there is a freezing of social desirability, or whether racial attitudes are subject to adjustment, there are individual cases which may support either side and lend support to the position taken regarding transracial adoption. There is not an acceptable tool for classifying potential adopters of children of opposite races, and the interaction between the educational and social characteristics of the adults seeking adoption of black children with the tools for measuring academic success belies any discrete difference in success of the black child in the white home.

The typical approach has been the use of some kind of ad hoc response form which addresses racial attitudes. There has not been any parametric "blind" measure of this concept of racial identity, and a measure which is nonstandardized and content laden does not have the potential for screening any but the most extreme racist. Again, the rest is often up to the first line worker, and this leads to a level of subjectivity which obfuscates any systematic inquiry attempted by the introduction of the measure.

One does not simply test for racial attitude by saying "Let us ask people if they are prejudiced". There are many writers who disdain control groups and who discount the results of empirical assessments. Some actually dismiss any inferential apporach out of hand. Chimezie (1975) made the following statement: "One criticism of the arguments against transracial adoption is that the fears and the adverse effects mentioned are not based on empirical studies of black children raised in white homes. It should be made clear that the issue is not whether transracially adopted black children are taunted and antagonized by whites, deprived of certain survival skills and constantly confronted by reminders of negative exceptionality, all this has been documented in the literature." This statement was followed by a footnote, which

is a reference to the New York Times magazine as source.In other words, the literature is not important, because we already know how bad this concept is, and we know it because it is in the newspaper.

How does one test for "taunting"? To some authors, the use of questions which ask children if they have ever been taunted by whites provides sufficient basis for selectivity in adoption or placement. It is unlikely that any black child in this country has not experienced some racism, even if it was a media representation. An assertion that whites cannot foster black children because of these experiences is an assertion that blacks and whites cannot coexist because there is racism in the American social arena.

Studies of school achievement, I.Q., success in placement, are testable and provide a base of support for transracial adoption and placement. These studies are rather static, and again,biased for verbal skills, but language is not to be minimized in discussions of potential acceptance into the marketplace. Testing for racial awareness is not possible without covert measures in place which also involve control groups of whites and blacks in inracial placements. Dependent variables are always confounded when the operational definition of racism and racial awareness is embedded in the design.

The difficulty of testing for these factors has added to confusion, as theory takes precedence over data. Most information comes from small samples and personal interviews, and is selectively cited by special interest groups.

Given that little discrete experimental data exists on the psychological effects of transracial adoption, the decision facing child placing agencies is subjetive at best and political at worst. The issue, in the estimation of this author, is not whether identity is abrogated by cross racial placements, but whether identity as a subjective abstract concern is reason to dismiss the findings which address differences in achievement. There are thousands of black children awaiting placement whose concern is a place to live, regardless of long range abstract concerns.

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